

News from Ed Markey

United States Congress

Massachusetts Seventh District

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday June 30, 1997

CONTACTS: Michal Freedhoff

Jeff Duncan

(202) 225-2836

NRC TO REPEAL RULES BARRING COMBUSTIBLE FIRE BARRIERS IN NUCLEAR REACTORS

**Rep. Markey calls NRC plan to relax fire safety regulations
"appalling bad judgment that risks thousands of lives"**

WASHINGTON, DC - Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-MA), a senior Member of the House Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Energy and Power, today released a letter he received from Dr. Shirley Jackson, Chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), that admitted both to the use of combustible fire barrier penetration seals in 106 of the nation's 109 civilian nuclear reactors as well as to the NRC's plans to remove its regulation that requires that these materials be non-combustible. Dr. Jackson's letter was written as an interim response to Rep. Markey's May 8, 1997 letter that asked the NRC to justify its acquiescence to the use of combustible fire barrier penetration seals in nuclear power plants.

Dr. Jackson's letter acknowledges that "RTV silicone foam is technically classified as combustible" but goes on to say that "NRC staff plans to propose a rule change that would eliminate that requirement [that fire barrier penetration seals be non-combustible] since there is no technical requirement for it."

"Rather than replace the seals with safe fire barriers that comply with their own regulations, the NRC has instead decided to remove the requirement that these materials be non-combustible. This decision to relax fire safety requirements will no doubt save nuclear utilities millions of dollars; what it will not do is help to save people's lives in the event of a fire," said Rep. Markey.

Recent incidents have raised awareness of the potential for fires that threaten public safety at nuclear power plants. According to an NRC document, a March 7, 1997 problem with the Boston Edison Pilgrim reactor led to the spillage of 4300 gallons of combustible oil over an area of 7000 square feet inside the station's turbine building. The NRC document stated that the event posed "the potential for a significant fire." Fortunately, the oil did not ignite. The Pilgrim reactor relies on thousands of RTV silicone foam penetration seals to prevent fire from spreading from one area of the reactor to another. Because of the large area that the spilled oil covered, a fire could have disabled both the normal and emergency systems used to cool the reactor fuel and spread throughout the plant, potentially leading to the release of radioactivity into the environment at great risk to public health and safety. Pilgrim's fire hazards analysis did not take spillages such as this one into account.

A May 30, 1997 U.S. General Accounting Office review was critical of the NRC's oversight of the nuclear power industry, noting that the "NRC believes that plants are safe to operate even when some of their safety systems are not working properly" and that for some plants "NRC has not taken aggressive enforcement action to force the licensees to fix their long-standing safety problems on a timely basis."

"Freak accidents such as the oil spill at the Pilgrim plant are precisely why prescriptive fire safety regulations should remain stringent and be diligently enforced by the NRC," said Rep. Markey.